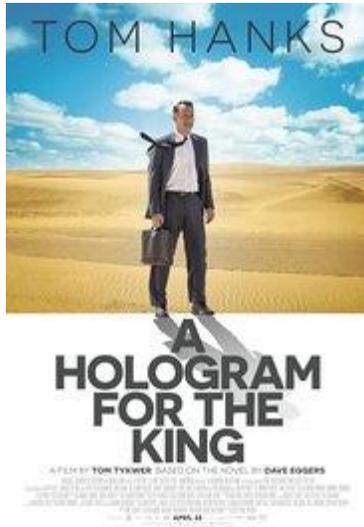


AN AUTOPSY OF A *HOLOGRAM FOR THE KING*:

By Elizabeth Lopez



A Hologram for the King is a wide-ranging and culturally specific movie that has a lot to recommend it. Even though its pleasures are momentary, and as fulfilling as cotton candy, it's still a congenial movie that people might enjoy, if they were aware of it. Tom Hanks is a reliably amiable presence. And, this movie has a lovely picture-postcard quality in certain of its dreamier sequences.

It provides the kind of meditative, escapist fantasy that expansive stretches of sand can elicit for a Western audience. The filmmaker, Tom Tykwer, then goes on to punctuate that landscape, focusing on one of those incongruent megalopolis structures that suddenly erupts from the desert.

Hanks has many of the fumblingly sweet and pungently direct exchanges that we've come to expect in a fish-out-of-water fable, when someone enters a foreign land. In this case, his character Alan is not only a stranger in a strange land, he's trying to make a difficult transition from life as a dependable breadwinner and husband to one on the edge of uncertain employment and divorce.

Alan finds himself surrounded by young and hungry colleagues looking to him for guidance at their new outpost in Saudi Arabia. But, he's come un-tethered from his old routines, clinging to the occasional calls and texts he receives from his daughter Kit, no matter the time difference. Kit generously provides the consolation and emotional support he needs, even though she's been let down by him recently. Because of his financial difficulties, she's had to postpone college, until she can scrape enough money to re-enroll. As Alan grapples with a new sense of identity for himself, she's largely the only person he can talk to, although their communication is distant and fleeting, hampered by logistics.

Eventually, there's the unlikely promise of healing his heartbreak through a connection with the capable, professional Saudi woman who comes into his life. After a series of public meetings, when they go on their first date, it extends well beyond dinner.

Following the wide-ranging and honest conversation that they have on a chauffeured drive to their dinner destination, they ignite a lightning-quick, shared passion.

The movie's adult attitude and pacing is a welcome departure from the glut of summer superhero movies out there. Though Alan's path is meandering, the unnerving encounters from his peeking into hidden corners of Saudi society are rewarding. Unfortunately, in the last third of the movie, the story seems undercooked, regardless of the painstaking way this meal has been plated amidst an alluring backdrop.

Perhaps, the filmmakers intentionally decided to leave a couple of storyline strands insufficiently resolved. Perhaps, an ambiguous quality was meant to be a further signifier that this film is for discerning audiences. But, I doubt such an equivocal viewpoint would speak to people who expressly bought a ticket in order to luxuriate in a glossy travelogue.

The trend of late with profitable summer movies like *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* franchise and *Eat, Pray, Love* has been to invite the possibility of self-actualization and a hint of romance. In the end, after its buffet of delights, a film has to decide to say something or endorse a particular way of thinking. It has to plant its flag and stand for something, no matter how trite. It can't lamely decide to drop to the ground and nap as the credits roll.

We've been trained to expect a shape and a form in our received storytelling. There's a built-in contract agreed upon with the audience that enables a sense of interactivity, if limited; it's what allows people to watch for plot set-ups and payoffs. Just as genre films must meet established conditions for their niche, films in general usually assure an audience that they'll not only be entertaining, but will deliver a kind of encompassing experience. Without that, over time, instead of feeling satisfied, viewers may feel a sense of loss as every minute, the good will initially traded, slips away and gets flicked back with a filthy, mocking finger like so much cheap change.

Bereft of any sweeping design, the randomness of the thrust of Alan's personal tale slowly loses its charm. It feels formless, less like deliberately hewing to the improvisation of life and more of a rambling road adventure with greater pretensions for itself.

My personal theory is it's emblematic of an ADD sensibility which offers a finely tailored ensemble of vignettes that aren't supposed to necessarily reflect on one another in service of a larger theme. Tom Tykwer, who also directed *Run Lola Run*, has a penchant for creating kinetic scenes for outsiders, who find themselves in freakishly tense situations. But, in a previous effort, which attempted to regurgitate the 500-page *Cloud Atlas* into a palatable cinematic exploration, Tykwer bit off more than he could chew. In that film which was another Hanks collaboration, a definite push was made to try and tie together sprawling episodes into some sort of meaningful tapestry. Unfortunately, without clear, plot-based imperatives, the end result of his work, and this latest film, can be diffuse.

Though I've tendered only qualified praise for *A Hologram for the King*, I do regret its invisible impression at the box office. The dismal marketing campaign hasn't distilled its main joys. So, people haven't had the chance to discover the film and form their own opinions.

In fact, it's been promoted with all the savoir faire of the 80's movie *Ishtar*, another failed desert comedy. The clip that played only rarely the week of its April debut

showed Hanks mugging it next to a turbaned man (with rotting teeth), who provides requisite “local color.” The ad seemed to say, “Join us for sand, sun, and... snark!” with the subtext being: *Feel like a global tourist (without actually having to go there and getting dirty)*. I suppose it’s conceivable they were knowingly appealing to this rather narrow-minded, fastidious consumer.

The odd thing is that the teaser is offensive in a fashion not present in the movie itself. There’s none of that post-colonial condescension that can sometimes unscrupulously worm its way into feel-good fare. Commercials are seldom honest indicators of quality, but why didn’t this half-hearted campaign sprinkle a little romantic fairy dust and highlight the film’s genuine assets? After all, *A Hologram for the King*’s a fun romp in an exotic place that’s as good as any to spend a lazy, summer afternoon lolling about in...